

# The Nun's Priest's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

Translated by Nevill Coghill

- Once, long ago, there dwelt a poor old widow  
In a small cottage, by a little meadow  
Beside a grove and standing in a dale.  
This widow-woman of whom I tell my tale  
5 Since the sad day when last she was a wife  
Had led a very patient, simple life.
- 1 Little she had in capital or rent,  
But still, by making do with what God sent,  
She kept herself and her two daughters going.
- 10 Three hefty sows—no more—were all her showing,  
Three cows as well; there was a sheep called Molly.  
Sooty her hall, her kitchen melancholy,  
And there she ate full many a slender meal;  
There was no *sauce piquante*<sup>1</sup> to spice her veal,
- 15 No dainty morsel ever passed her throat,  
2 According to her cloth she cut her coat.  
Repletion<sup>2</sup> never left her in disquiet  
And all her physic was a temperate diet,  
Hard work for exercise and heart's content.

1. *sauce piquante* (pē' kent): French for a pleasantly sharp sauce, used for fancy and expensive meals.  
2. **Repletion** (ri plē' shən) *n.*: The state of having eaten too much.

## ◆ Build Vocabulary

**capital** (kap'et 'l) *n.*: Wealth in money or property

20 And rich man's gout did nothing to prevent  
 Her dancing, apoplexy<sup>3</sup> struck her not;  
 She drank no wine, nor white nor red had got.  
 Her board was mostly served with white and black,  
 Milk and brown bread, in which she found no lack;  
 25 Broiled bacon or an egg or two were common,  
 She was in fact a sort of dairy-woman.

3 She had a yard that was enclosed about  
 By a stockade and a dry ditch without,  
 In which she kept a cock called Chanticleer.  
 30 In all the land for crowing he'd no peer;  
 His voice was jollier than the organ blowing  
 In church on Sundays, he was great at crowing.  
 Far, far more regular than any clock  
 Or abbey bell the crowing of this cock.

35 The equinoctial wheel and its position<sup>4</sup>  
 At each ascent he knew by intuition;  
 At every hour—fifteen degrees of movement—  
 He crowed so well there could be no improvement.  
 His comb was redder than fine coral, tall  
 40 And battlemented like a castle wall,  
 His bill was black and shone as bright as jet,  
 Like azure were his legs and they were set  
 On azure toes with nails of lily white,  
 Like burnished gold his feathers, flaming bright.

45 This gentlecock was master in some measure  
 Of seven hens, all there to do his pleasure.  
 They were his sisters and his paramours,  
 Colored like him in all particulars;  
 She with the loveliest dyes upon her throat  
 50 Was known as gracious Lady Pertelote.  
 Courteous she was, discreet and debonair,  
 Companionable too, and took such care  
 In her deportment, since she was seven days old  
 She held the heart of Chanticleer controlled,  
 55 Locked up securely in her every limb;  
 O such happiness his love to him!  
 And such a joy it was to hear them sing,  
 As when the glorious sun began to spring,  
 In sweet accord *My love is far from land*<sup>5</sup>

60 —For in those far off days I understand  
 All birds and animals could speak and sing.  
 Now it befell, as dawn began to spring,  
 When Chanticleer and Pertelote and all  
 His wives were perched in this poor widow's hall  
 65 (Fair Pertelote was next him on the perch),  
 This Chanticleer began to groan and lurch  
 Like someone sorely troubled by a dream,  
 And Pertelote who heard him roar and scream  
 Was quite aghast and said, "O dearest heart,  
 70 What's ailing you? Why do you groan and start?  
 Fie, what a sleeper! What a noise to make!"

3. **apoplexy:** Old-fashioned term for a stroke.

4. **equinoctial . . . position:** Chaucer and his contemporaries accounted for changes in the positions of stars and planets by imagining that the heavens circled the Earth once a day, moving fifteen degrees each hour.

5. ***My love is far from land:*** Refrain of a popular song.

◆ **Reading Strategy**

What context clues might help you figure out the meaning of *aghast* in line 69?







English Travelers Setting Forth, From *The Canterbury Tales*, The British Library

- 1 ▲ **Critical Viewing** How do you think these pilgrims would have reacted to "The Nun's Priest's Tale"? [Speculate]





“Madam,” he said, “I beg you not to take  
 Offense, but by the Lord I had a dream  
 So terrible just now I had to scream;  
 75 I still can feel my heart racing from fear.  
 God turn my dream to good and guard all here.  
 And keep my body out of durance vile!<sup>6</sup>  
 I dreamt that roaming up and down a while  
 Within our yard I saw a kind of beast,  
 80 A sort of hound that tried or seemed at least  
 To try and seize me. . . would have killed me dead!  
 His color was a blend of yellow and red,  
 His ears and tail were tipped with sable fur  
 Unlike the rest; he was a russet cur.  
 85 Small was his snout, his eyes were glowing bright.  
 It was enough to make one die of fright.  
 That was no doubt what made me groan and swoon.”

“For shame,” she said, “you timorous poltroon!<sup>7</sup>  
 Alas, what cowardice! By God above,  
 90 You’ve forfeited my heart and lost my love.  
 I cannot love a coward, come what may.  
 For certainly, whatever we may say,  
 All women long—and O that it might be!—  
 For husbands tough, dependable and free,  
 95 Secret, discreet, no niggard,<sup>8</sup> not a fool  
 That boasts and then will find his courage cool  
 At every trifling thing. By God above,  
 How dare you say for shame, and to your love,  
 That anything at all was to be feared?  
 100 Have you no manly heart to match your beard?  
 And can a dream reduce you to such terror?  
 Dreams are a vanity, God knows, pure error.  
 Dreams are engendered in the too-replete  
 From vapors in the belly, which compete  
 105 With others, too abundant, swollen tight.

“No doubt the redness in your dream tonight  
 Comes from the superfluity and force  
 Of the red choler in your blood. Of course.  
 That is what puts a dreamer in the dread  
 110 Of crimsoned arrows, fires flaming red,  
 Of great red monsters making as to fight him,  
 And big red whelps and little ones to bite him;  
 Just so the black and melancholy vapors  
 Will set a sleeper shrieking, cutting capers  
 115 And swearing that black bears, black bulls as well,  
 Or blackest fiends are haling him to Hell.  
 And there are other vapors that I know  
 That on a sleeping man will work their woe,  
 But I’ll pass on as lightly as I can.

120 “Take Cato<sup>9</sup> now, that was so wise a man,  
 Did he not say, ‘Take no account of dreams’?  
 Now, sir,” she said, “on flying from these beams,  
 For love of God do take some laxative;



6. **durance vile**: Long imprisonment.

### ◆ Literary Focus

How does Pertelote’s reaction (lines 88–105) lend comedy to this passage?

7. **poltroon** (pāl trōn’) *n.*: Coward.

8. **niggard**: Stingy person.

9. **Cato**: Dionysius Cato, supposed author of a book of maxims used in elementary education.

### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**timorous** (tim’ er əs) *adj.*: Timid

Upon my soul that's the advice to give  
 125 For melancholy choler; let me urge  
 You free yourself from vapors with a purge.  
 And that you may have no excuse to tarry  
 By saying this town has no apothecary,  
 1 I shall myself instruct you and prescribe  
 130 Herbs that will cure all vapors of that tribe,  
 Herbs from our very farmyard! You will find  
 Their natural property is to unbind  
 And purge you well beneath and well above.  
 Now don't forget it, dear, for God's own love!  
 135 Your face is choleric and shows distension;  
 Be careful lest the sun in his ascension  
 2 Should catch you full of humors,<sup>10</sup> hot and many.  
 And if he does, my dear, I'll lay a penny  
 It means a bout of fever or a breath  
 140 Of tertian ague.<sup>11</sup> You may catch your death.  
 "Worms for a day or two I'll have to give  
 3 As a digestive, then your laxative.  
 Centaury, fumitory, caper-spurge  
 And hellebore will make a splendid purge;  
 145 And then there's laurel or the blackthorn berry,  
 Ground-ivy too that makes our yard so merry;  
 Peck them right up, my dear, and swallow whole.  
 Be happy, husband, by your father's soul!  
 Don't be afraid of dreams. I'll say no more."  
 150 "Madam," he said, "I thank you for your lore,  
 But with regard to Cato all the same,  
 His wisdom has, no doubt, a certain fame,  
 4 But though he said that we should take no heed  
 Of dreams, by God in ancient books I read  
 5 155 Of many a man of more authority  
 Than ever Cato was, believe you me,  
 Who say the very opposite is true  
 And prove their theories by experience too.  
 Dreams have quite often been significations  
 160 As well of triumphs as of tribulations  
 That people undergo in this our life.  
 This needs no argument at all, dear wife,  
 The proof is all too manifest indeed.  
 "One of the greatest authors one can read  
 165 Says thus: there were two comrades once who went  
 On pilgrimage, sincere in their intent.  
 And as it happened they had reached a town  
 Where such a throng was milling up and down  
 And yet so scanty the accommodation,  
 170 They could not find themselves a habitation,  
 No, not a cottage that could lodge them both.  
 And so they separated, very loath,  
 Under constraint of this necessity  
 And each went off to find some hostelry,  
 175 And lodge whatever way his luck might fall.

**10. humors:** People in Chaucer's time believed that bodily fluids, called humors, were responsible for one's health and disposition. An excess of the fluid called yellow bile resulted in a choleric, or quick-tempered, personality. In lines 108 and 125, Chaucer seems to use the word *choler* as a synonym for the term *humor*.

**11. tertian ague** (tur shen ā' gyōō) Malarial fever.







◀ Critical Viewing What qualities of the animals pictured remind you of human qualities? [Classify]

6

Woman Feeding Chickens, From an Italian manuscript (c. 1385), Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

- "The first of them found refuge in a stall  
Down in a yard with oxen and a plow.  
His friend found lodging for himself somehow  
Elsewhere, by accident or destiny,  
180 Which governs all of us and equally.  
"Now it so happened, long ere it was day,  
This fellow had a dream, and as he lay  
In bed it seemed he heard his comrade call,  
'Help! I am lying in an ox's stall  
185 And shall tonight be murdered as I lie.  
Help me, dear brother, help or I shall die!  
Come in all haste!' Such were the words he spoke;  
The dreamer, lost in terror, then awoke.  
But once awake he paid it no attention,  
190 Turned over and dismissed it as invention,  
It was a dream, he thought, a fantasy.  
And twice he dreamt this dream successively.  
"Yet a third time his comrade came again,  
Or seemed to come, and said, 'I have been slain.  
195 Look, look! my wounds are bleeding wide and deep,  
Rise early in the morning, break your sleep

7



And go to the west gate. You there shall see  
 A cart all loaded up with dung,' said he,  
 'And in that dung my body has been hidden.  
 200 Boldly arrest that cart as you are bidden.  
 It was my money that they killed me for.'  
 "He told him every detail, sighing sore,  
 And pitiful in feature, pale of hue.  
 This dream, believe me, Madam, turned out true;  
 205 For in the dawn, as soon as it was light,  
 He went to where his friend had spent the night  
 And when he came upon the cattle-stall  
 He looked about him and began to call.  
 "The innkeeper, appearing thereupon,  
 210 Quickly gave answer, 'Sir, your friend has gone.  
 He left the town a little after dawn.'  
 The man began to feel suspicious, drawn  
 By memories of his dream—the western gate,  
 The dung-cart—off he went, he would not wait,  
 215 Towards the western entry. There he found,  
 Seemingly on its way to dung some ground,  
 A dung-cart loaded on the very plan  
 Described so closely by the murdered man.  
 So he began to shout courageously  
 220 For right and vengeance on the felony,  
 'My friend's been killed! There's been a foul attack,  
 He's in that cart and gaping on his back!  
 Fetch the authorities, get the sheriff down  
 —Whosever job it is to run the town—  
 225 Help! My companion's murdered, sent to glory!  
 "What need I add to finish off the story?  
 People ran out and cast the cart to ground,  
 And in the middle of the dung they found  
 The murdered man. The corpse was fresh and new.  
 230 "O blessed God, that art so just and true,  
 Thus thou revealest murder! As we say,  
 'Murder will out.' We see it day by day.  
 Murder's a foul, abominable treason,  
 So loathsome to God's justice, to God's reason,  
 235 He will not suffer its concealment. True,  
 Things may lie hidden for a year or two,  
 But still 'Murder will out,' that's my conclusion.  
 "All the town officers in great confusion  
 Seized on the carter and they gave him hell,  
 240 And then they racked the innkeeper as well,  
 And both confessed. And then they took the wrecks  
 And there and then they hanged them by their necks.  
 2 "By this we see that dreams are to be dreaded.  
 And in the self-same book I find embedded,  
 245 Right in the very chapter after this  
 (I'm not inventing, as I hope for bliss)  
 The story of two men who started out  
 To cross the sea—for merchandise no doubt—



But as the winds were contrary they waited.  
 250 It was a pleasant town, I should have stated,  
 Merrily grouped about the haven-side.  
 A few days later with the evening tide  
 The wind veered round so as to suit them best;  
 They were delighted and they went to rest  
 255 Meaning to sail next morning early. Well,  
 To one of them a miracle befell.

"This man as he lay sleeping, it would seem,  
 Just before dawn had an astounding dream.  
 He thought a man was standing by his bed  
 260 Commanding him to wait, and thus he said:  
 'If you set sail tomorrow as you intend  
 You will be drowned. My tale is at an end.'

"He woke and told his friend what had occurred  
 And begged him that the journey be deferred  
 265 At least a day, implored him not to start.  
 But his companion, lying there apart,  
 Began to laugh and treat him to derision.  
 'I'm not afraid,' he said, 'of any vision,  
 To let it interfere with my affairs;

270 A straw for all your dreamings and your scares.  
 Dreams are just empty nonsense, merest japes;<sup>12</sup>  
 Why, people dream all day of owls and apes,  
 All sorts of trash that can't be understood,  
 Things that have never happened and never could.  
 275 But as I see you mean to stay behind  
 And miss the tide for wilful sloth of mind,  
 God knows I'm sorry for it, but good day!  
 And so he took his leave and went his way.

"And yet, before they'd covered half the trip  
 280 —I don't know what went wrong—there was a rip  
 And by some accident the ship went down,  
 Her bottom rent,<sup>13</sup> all hands aboard to drown  
 In sight of all the vessels at her side,  
 That had put out upon the self-same tide.

285 "So, my dear Pertelote, if you discern  
 The force of these examples, you may learn  
 One never should be careless about dreams,  
 For, undeniably, I say it seems  
 That many are a sign of trouble breeding.

290 "Now, take St. Kenelm's life which I've been reading;  
 He was Kenulphus' son, the noble King  
 Of Mercia. Now, St. Kenelm dreamt a thing  
 Shortly before they murdered him one day.  
 He saw his murder in a dream, I say.

4 295 His nurse expounded it and gave her reasons  
 On every point and warned him against treasons  
 But as the saint was only seven years old  
 All that she said about it left him cold.  
 He was so holy how could visions hurt?

300 "By God, I willingly would give my shirt

12. japes: Jokes.

13. rent: Torn.

#### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**derision** (di rizh' ən) *n.*: Contempt or  
 ridicule





To have you read his legend as I've read it;  
 And, Madam Pertelote, upon my credit,  
 Macrobius wrote of dreams and can explain us  
 The vision of young Scipio Africanus,<sup>14</sup>  
 305 And he affirms that dreams can give a due  
 Warnings of things that later on come true.  
 "And then there's the Old Testament—a manual  
 Well worth your study; see the *Book of Daniel*.  
 Did Daniel think a dream was vanity?  
 310 Read about Joseph too and you will see  
 That many dreams—I do not say that all—  
 Give cognizance of what is to befall.  
 "Look at Lord Pharaoh, king of Egypt! Look  
 At what befell his butler and his cook.  
 315 Did not their visions have a certain force?  
 But those who study history of course  
 Meet many dreams that set them wondering.  
 "What about Croesus too, the Lydian king,  
 Who dreamt that he was sitting in a tree,  
 320 Meaning he would be hanged? It had to be.  
 "Or take Andromache, great Hector's wife;<sup>15</sup>  
 The day on which he was to lose his life  
 She dreamt about, the very night before,  
 And realized that if Hector went to war  
 325 He would be lost that very day in battle.  
 She warned him; he dismissed it all as prattle  
 And sallied forth to fight, being self-willed,  
 And there he met Achilles and was killed.  
 The tale is long and somewhat overdrawn,  
 330 And anyhow it's very nearly dawn,  
 So let me say in very brief conclusion  
 My dream undoubtedly foretells confusion,  
 It bodes me ill, I say. And, furthermore,  
 Upon your laxatives I set no store,  
 335 For they are venomous. I've suffered by them  
 Often enough before and I defy them.  
 "And now, let's talk of fun and stop all this.  
 Dear Madam, as I hope for Heaven's bliss.  
 Of one thing God has sent me plenteous grace,  
 340 For when I see the beauty of your face,  
 That scarlet loveliness about your eyes,  
 All thought of terror and confusion dies.  
 For it's as certain as the Creed, I know,  
*Mulier est hominis confusio*  
 345 (A Latin tag, dear Madam, meaning this:  
 'Woman is man's delight and all his bliss').  
 For when at night I feel your feathery side,  
 Although perforce I cannot take a ride  
 Because, alas, our perch was made too narrow,  
 350 Delight and solace fill me to the marrow  
 And I defy all visions and all dreams!"  
 And with that word he flew down from the beams,

**14. Scipio Africanus**  
 (sip'ē ō af' ri kā' nes):  
 Famous Roman gen-  
 eral (237–183 B.C.).

**15. Andromache**  
 (an drām' ə kē) . . .  
**wife:** The wife of  
 Hector, the greatest  
 warrior in Troy at the  
 time of the Trojan War.

**♦ Literary Focus**  
 References to heroes  
 appear often in  
 epics. What effect do  
 the references in this  
 passage have?





For it was day, and down his hens flew all,  
 And with a chuck he gave the troupe a call  
 355 For he had found a seed upon the floor.  
 Royal he was, he was afraid no more.  
 He feathered Pertelote in wanton play  
 And trod her twenty times ere prime of day.  
 Grim as a lion's was his manly frown  
 360 As on his toes he sauntered up and down;  
 He scarcely deigned to set his foot to ground  
 And every time a seed of corn was found  
 He gave a chuck, and up his wives ran all.  
 Thus royal as a prince who strides his hall  
 365 Leave we this Chanticleer engaged on feeding  
 And pass to the adventure that was breeding.

Now when the month in which the world began,  
 March, the first month, when God created man,  
 Was over, and the thirty-second day  
 370 Thereafter ended, on the third of May  
 It happened that Chanticleer in all his pride,  
 His seven wives attendant at his side,  
 Cast his eyes upward to the blazing sun,  
 Which in the sign of *Taurus* then had run  
 375 His twenty-one degrees and somewhat more,  
 And knew by nature and no other lore  
 That it was nine o'clock. With blissful voice  
 He crew triumphantly and said, "Rejoice,  
 Behold the sun! The sun is up, my seven.  
 380 Look, it has climbed forty degrees in heaven,  
 Forty degrees and one in fact, by this.  
 Dear Madam Pertelote, my earthly bliss,  
 Hark to those blissful birds and how they sing!  
 Look at those pretty flowers, how they spring!  
 385 Solace and revel fill my heart!" He laughed.

But in that moment Fate let fly her shaft;  
 Ever the latter end of joy is woe,  
 God knows that worldly joy is swift to go.  
 A rhetorician<sup>16</sup> with a flair for style  
 390 Could chronicle this maxim in his file  
 Of Notable Remarks with safe conviction.  
 Then let the wise give ear; this is no fiction  
 My story is as true, I undertake,  
 As that of good Sir Lancelot du Lake<sup>17</sup>  
 395 Who held all women in such high esteem.  
 Let me return full circle to my theme.

A coal-tipped fox of sly iniquity<sup>18</sup>  
 That had been lurking round the grove for three  
 Long years, that very night burst through and passed  
 400 Stockade and hedge, as Providence forecast,  
 Into the yard where Chanticleer the Fair  
 Was wont, with all his ladies, to repair.  
 Still, in a bed of cabbages, he lay  
 Until about the middle of the day



Chaucer Reciting Troilus and Cressida Before a Court Gathering (Frontispiece) Corpus Christi College

▲ **Critical Viewing** Judging from this scene, what was a storytelling event in Chaucer's time like? [Interpret]

16. **rhetorician** (ret' ə rish' ən) *n.*: Person skilled in public speaking or writing.

17. **Sir Lancelot du Lake**: The most celebrated of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

18. **iniquity** (i nik' wi tē) *n.*: Wickedness.

### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**maxim** (maks' im) *n.*: Briefly expressed general truth or rule of conduct



405 Watching the cock and waiting for his cue,  
 As all these homicides so gladly do  
 That lie about in wait to murder men.  
 O false assassin, lurking in thy den!  
 O new Iscariot, new Ganelon!  
 410 And O Greek Sinon,<sup>19</sup> thou whose treachery won  
 Troy town and brought it utterly to sorrow!  
 O Chanticleer, accursed be that morrow  
 That brought thee to the yard from thy high beams!  
 Thou hadst been warned, and truly, by thy dreams  
 415 That this would be a perilous day for thee.  
 But that which God's foreknowledge can foresee  
 Must needs occur, as certain men of learning  
 Have said. Ask any scholar of discerning;  
 He'll say the Schools are filled with altercation  
 420 On this vexed matter of predestination<sup>20</sup>  
 Long bandied by a hundred thousand men.  
 How can I sift it to the bottom then?  
 The Holy Doctor St. Augustine shines  
 2 In this, and there is Bishop Bradwardine's  
 425 Authority, Boethius<sup>21</sup> too, decreeing  
 Whether the fact of God's divine foreseeing  
 Constrains me to perform a certain act  
 —And by "constraint" I mean the simple fact  
 Of mere compulsion by necessity—  
 430 Or whether a free choice is granted me  
 To do a given act or not to do it  
 Though, ere it was accomplished, God foreknew it.

#### 19. Iscariot . . .

##### Ganeton . . . Sinon:

Each of these men was famous for betrayal. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ; Ganelon betrayed Charlemagne's greatest knight, Roland; and Sinon convinced King Priam to bring the Trojan horse, filled with Greek troops, into Troy.

#### 20. predestination

(prē des' tē nā' shən)  
*n.*: The idea that God arranges beforehand everything that will happen.

#### 21. Bishop Bradwardine's . . . Boethius'

(bō ē' thē əs): Bishop Bradwardine was a well-known theologian of Chaucer's time. Boethius (A.D. 480–524) was a famous Roman philosopher.



3 ► **Critical Viewing** How do the position and facial expression of the subject of this painting suggest he is telling a story? [Support]

*The Nun's Priest*, Detail from the Ellesmere Manuscript, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California



Or whether Providence is not so stringent  
And merely makes necessity contingent.

435 But I decline discussion of the matter;  
My tale is of a cock and of the clatter  
That came of following his wife's advice  
To walk about his yard on the precise  
Morning after the dream of which I told.

440 O woman's counsel is so often cold!  
A woman's counsel brought us first to woe.  
Made Adam out of Paradise to go  
Where he had been so merry, so well at ease.  
But, for I know not whom it may displease

5 445 If I suggest that women are to blame,  
Pass over that; I only speak in game.  
Read the authorities to know about  
What has been said of women; you'll find out  
These are the cock's words, and not mine, I'm giving;  
450 I think no harm of any woman living.

Merrily in her dust-bath in the sand  
Lay Pertelote. Her sisters were at hand  
Basking in sunlight. Chanticleer sang free,  
More merrily than a mermaid in the sea  
455 (For *Physiologus*<sup>22</sup> reports the thing  
And says how well and merrily they sing).  
And so it happened as he cast his eye  
Towards the cabbage at a butterfly  
It fell upon the fox there, lying low.  
460 Gone was all inclination then to crow.  
"Cok cok," he cried, giving a sudden start,  
As one who feels a terror at his heart,  
For natural instinct teaches beasts to flee  
The moment they perceive an enemy,  
465 Though they had never met with it before.

This Chanticleer was shaken to the core  
And would have fled. The fox was quick to say  
However, "Sir! Whither so fast away?  
Are you afraid of me, that am your friend?  
470 A fiend, or worse, I should be, to intend  
You harm, or practice villainy upon you;  
Dear sir, I was not even spying on you!  
Truly I came to do no other thing  
Than just to lie and listen to you sing.

6 475 You have as merry a voice as God has given  
To any angel in the courts of Heaven;  
To that you add a musical sense as strong  
As had Boethius who was skilled in song.

7 480 My Lord your Father (God receive his soul!),  
Your mother too—how courtly, what control!—  
Have honored my poor house, to my great ease;  
And you, sir, too, I should be glad to please.  
For, when it comes to singing, I'll say this  
(Else may these eyes of mine be barred from bliss),

◆ **Reading Strategy**

Explain what context clues could help you to decode the word *counsel* in line 441.

4

**22. *Physiologus*:**

Book on nature written in Latin meter.

◆ **Build Vocabulary**

**stringent** (strin' jənt) *adj.*: Strict





485 There never was a singer I would rather  
 Have heard at dawn than your respected father.  
 All that he sang came welling from his soul  
 And how he put his voice under control!  
 The pains he took to keep his eyes tight shut  
 490 In concentration—then the tip-toe strut,  
 The slender neck stretched out, the delicate beak!  
 No singer could approach him in technique  
 Or rival him in song, still less surpass.  
 I've read the story in *Burnel the Ass*,<sup>23</sup>  
 495 Among some other verses, of a cock  
 Whose leg in youth was broken by a knock  
 A clergyman's son had given him, and for this  
 He made the father lose his benefice.  
 But certainly there's no comparison  
 500 Between the subtlety of such an one  
 And the discretion of your father's art  
 And wisdom. Oh, for charity of heart,  
 Can you not emulate your sire and sing?"

This Chanticleer began to heat a wing  
 505 As one incapable of smelling treason,  
 So wholly had this flattery ravished reason.  
 Alas, my lords! there's many a sycophant<sup>24</sup>  
 And flatterer that fill your courts with cant  
 And give more pleasure with their zeal forsooth  
 510 Than he who speaks in soberness and truth.  
 Read what *Ecclesiasticus*<sup>25</sup> records  
 Of flatterers. 'Ware treachery, my lords!

This Chanticleer stood high upon his toes,  
 He stretched his neck, his eyes began to close,  
 515 His beak to open; with his eyes shut tight  
 He then began to sing with all his might.



**23. *Burnel the Ass*:**  
 Twelfth-century poem  
 in which a rooster  
 gains revenge after  
 being mistreated by a  
 priest's son.

**24. sycophant** (sik' ə  
 fent) *n.*: Person who  
 seeks favor by flatter-  
 ing influential people.

**25. *Ecclesiasticus*:**  
 Not Ecclesiastes, but a  
 book of proverbs  
 included with the  
 Apocrypha in the  
 Authorized Version of  
 the Bible.



Chaucer's *Canterbury Pilgrims*. William Blake  
 The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

- 2 ▲ **Critical Viewing** Which elements in this etching seem realistic? Which elements seem mythic or fantastic? Why did the artist choose to combine these elements? [Deduce]



3 | Sir Russel Fox then leapt to the attack,  
 Grabbing his gorge he flung him o'er his back  
 And off he bore him to the woods, the brute,  
 520 And for the moment there was no pursuit.  
 O Destiny that may not be evaded!  
 Alas that Chanticleer had so paraded!  
 Alas that he had flown down from the beams!  
 O that his wife took no account of dreams!  
 525 And on a Friday too to risk their necks!  
 O Venus, goddess of the joys of sex,  
 Since Chanticleer thy mysteries professed  
 And in thy service always did his best,  
 And more for pleasure than to multiply  
 530 His kind, on thine own day is he to die?  
 O Geoffrey, thou my dear and sovereign master<sup>26</sup>  
 Who, when they brought King Richard to disaster  
 And shot him dead, lamented so his death,  
 Would that I had thy skill, thy gracious breath,  
 535 To chide a Friday half so well as you!  
 (For he was killed upon a Friday too.)  
 Then I could fashion you a rhapsody  
 For Chanticleer in dread and agony.  
 Sure never such a cry or lamentation  
 540 Was made by ladies of high Trojan station,  
 When Ilium fell and Pyrrhus with his sword  
 Grabbed Priam by the beard, their king and lord,  
 And slew him there as the *Aeneid* tells,<sup>27</sup>  
 As what was uttered by those hens. Their yells  
 545 Surpassed them all in palpitating fear  
 When they beheld the rape of Chanticleer.  
 Dame Pertelote emitted sovereign shrieks  
 That echoed up in anguish to the peaks  
 Louder than those extorted from the wife  
 550 Of Hasdrubal,<sup>28</sup> when he had lost his life  
 And Carthage all in flame and ashes lay.  
 She was so full of torment and dismay  
 That in the very flames she chose her part  
 And burnt to ashes with a steadfast heart.  
 555 O woeful hens, louder your shrieks and higher  
 Than those of Roman matrons when the fire  
 Consumed their husbands, senators of Rome,  
 When Nero burnt their city and their home,  
 Beyond a doubt that Nero was their bale!<sup>29</sup>  
 560 Now let me turn again to tell my tale;  
 This blessed widow and her daughters two  
 Heard all these hens in clamor and halloo  
 And, rushing to the door at all this shrieking,  
 They saw the fox towards the covert streaking  
 565 And, on his shoulder, Chanticleer stretched flat.  
 "Look, look!" they cried, "O mercy, look at that!  
 Ha! Ha! the fox!" and after him they ran,  
 And stick in hand ran many a serving man,



26. O Geoffrey . . .  
**master:** Geoffrey de  
 Vinsauf, twelfth-century  
 author of a book on  
 rhetoric.

27. Sure never . . .  
***Aeneid* tells:** Refer-  
 ence to the destruction  
 of Troy as described in  
 the Roman poet Virgil's  
*Aeneid*.

28. Hasdrubal (haz'  
 drōō bəl): Carthaginian  
 general.

29. bale *n.*: Evil;  
 harm.

#### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**cant** (kant) *n.*: Insincere or meaningless talk



Ran Coll our dog, ran Talbot, Bran and Shaggy,  
 570 And with a distaff in her hand ran Maggie,  
 Ran cow and calf and ran the very hogs  
 In terror at the barking of the dogs;  
 The men and women shouted, ran and cursed,  
 They ran so hard they thought their hearts would burst,  
 575 They yelled like fiends in Hell, ducks left the water  
 Quacking and flapping as on point of slaughter,  
 Up flew the geese in terror over the trees,  
 Out of the hive came forth the swarm of bees;  
 So hideous was the noise—God bless us all,  
 580 Jack Straw and all his followers in their brawl<sup>30</sup>  
 Were never half so shrill, for all their noise,  
 When they were murdering those Flemish boys,  
 As that day's hue and cry upon the fox.  
 They grabbed up trumpets made of brass and box,  
 585 Of horn and bone, on which they blew and pooped,  
 And therewithal they shouted and they whooped  
 So that it seemed the very heavens would fall.

And now, good people, pay attention all.  
 See how Dame Fortune quickly changes side  
 1 590 And robs her enemy of hope and pride!  
 This cock that lay upon the fox's back  
 In all his dread contrived to give a quack  
 And said, "Sir Fox, if I were you, as God's  
 My witness, I would round upon these clods  
 595 And shout, 'Turn back, you saucy bumpkins all!  
 A very pestilence upon you fall!  
 Now that I have in safety reached the wood  
 Do what you like, the cock is mine for good;  
 I'll eat him there in spite of every one.'"  
 2 600 The fox replying, "Faith, it shall be done!"  
 Opened his mouth and spoke. The nimble bird,  
 Breaking away upon the uttered word,  
 Flew high into the tree-tops on the spot.  
 And when the fox perceived where he had got,  
 605 "Alas," he cried, "alas, my Chanticleer,  
 I've done you grievous wrong, indeed I fear  
 I must have frightened you; I grabbed too hard  
 When I caught hold and took you from the yard.  
 But, sir, I meant no harm, don't be offended,  
 610 Come down and I'll explain what I intended;  
 So help me God I'll tell the truth—on oath!  
 "No," said the cock, "and curses on us both,  
 3 And first on me if I were such a dunce  
 As let you fool me oftener than once.  
 615 Never again, for all your flattering lies,  
 You'll coax a song to make me blink my eyes;  
 And as for those who blink when they should look,  
 God blot them from his everlasting Book!"  
 4 "Nay, rather," said the fox, "his plagues be flung  
 620 On all who chatter that should hold their tongue."

**30. Jack Straw . . .**  
**brawl:** Jack Straw was  
 one of the leaders of  
 the Peasants' Revolt  
 (1381).





- 4 | Lo, such it is not to be on your guard  
Against the flatterers of the world, or yard,  
And if you think my story is absurd,  
A foolish trifle of a beast and bird,  
625 A fable of a fox, a cock, a hen,  
Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen.  
St. Paul himself, a saint of great discerning,  
Says that all things are written for our learning;  
So take the grain and let the chaff be still.  
630 And, gracious Father, if it be thy will  
As saith my Savior, make us all good men,  
And bring us to his heavenly bliss.  
Amen.



## Guide for Responding

### ◆ Literature and Your Life

**Reader's Response** In what part of the tale did you find the mismatch between Chaucer's style and the events of the story the funniest? Why?

**Thematic Focus** In this tale, what members of society might Chaucer be mocking?

**Role Play** With a partner, role-play a conversation between Chanticleer and Pertelote about the day's events.

#### ☒ Check Your Comprehension

1. Who are Chanticleer and Pertelote?
2. Why is Chanticleer disturbed at the beginning of the story?
3. What is Pertelote's advice to Chanticleer when he tells her his dream?
4. (a) How does the fox capture Chanticleer?  
(b) How does Chanticleer escape?

### ◆ Critical Thinking

#### INTERPRET

1. (a) Name three characteristics of Chanticleer that are realistic. (b) Name three characteristics of Chanticleer that it would be absurd to attribute to a rooster. **[Classify]**
2. Compare and contrast the methods of argument that Pertelote and Chanticleer use to defend their interpretations of dreams. **[Compare and Contrast]**
3. The first story that Chanticleer tells has the three-part structure typical of medieval tales: an exposition describing the characters and setting, a complication or problem, and a climax. Does "The Nun's Priest's Tale" as a whole follow this pattern? Why or why not? **[Analyze]**
4. (a) What is the moral of this fable? (b) How seriously do you think the narrator takes this moral? Explain. **[Interpret]**
5. What does this tale suggest about its teller, the nun's priest? **[Draw Conclusions]**